

SERMON – A THANKFUL HEART

Well, it's definitely been an epic 9-week journey into the deeper dimensions of prayer., so I want to begin today with a bit of a re-cap. I'm a great believer in looking back on journey's so that we can remind ourselves **where** God has taken us in this journey. And most importantly so that we can see the good fruits produced from this journey.

So first up, we invited Bishop Bruce Gilbert to begin our journey and Bruce reminded us of an important aspect of prayer. That our prayer life should also be allied to action. 'Praction' as Bruce called it. I know that many of you purchased Bruce's book ***One Thought for the Day*** and found it a great encouragement.

Which feels like the right moment to update everyone on some sad news. Just a couple of weeks after being with us, Bruce was diagnosed with widespread and aggressive cancer and has declined very rapidly. On Wednesday we arranged for some flowers to be sent to Bruce and his wife Pat. On Thursday I received a lovely early morning call from Pat thanking us for the gift. I asked if it would be ok to tell our church whanau the news of Bruce, and she said of course, we would value your prayers. On a personal note, I'm just so pleased that we at St George's had the gift of Bruce (and Pats) presence before the illness took hold.

The following week I followed up on Jeremy's observation in our Daniel series, that for both Daniel and Jesus, prayer was an **'as usual'** part of their lives. How they both created specific sacred places to commune with God. So we invited Gray Paterson to talk about how he regularly goes to his Prayer chair time and the fruits of his time in communion of God. Again, I know that many were encouraged by Gray's words.

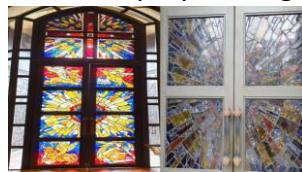
Next up we heard from Rod and Penny Kestle speaking about their own journey with Rod's cancer diagnosis. On the Saturday morning at a Men's breakfast Rod spoke of how his diagnosis had taken him into deeper dimensions of prayer, and from this a deeper sense of God's presence and peace.

On the Sunday morning Penny spoke very honestly and very movingly of how those beautiful words of wisdom from Paul, that **'God's grace will be sufficient in our weakness'** has now become part of her prayer DNA. Which is a deep wisdom for all of us when we hit the hard roads of life.

The following week Jeremy and I went to Melbourne for an inspiring 24/7 prayer gathering, as Karen Spoelstra took on the complex questions raised by the prayer of Hannah in scripture. Where Hannah bargains with God for a child. How does this speak into the nature of our own prayers?

The next week we returned from Melbourne and reported back with two abiding images.

Being led by the Spirit is like surfing God's waves. But to catch the wave we do need to be in the water waiting and ready. And this image of the difference prayer brings to our lives.



The fruit of prayer is like the difference between a stained-glass window from the outside to the inside. Prayer brings more illumination, clarity and more of the radiance of God's presence.

The first wave of the Spirit came along quicker than we anticipated as we received an email from Hayley at 30,000 feet in the sky on the way home. This led to the fruit of our **All-Day Prayer gathering** here in our church. And I have to say this was deeply moving, very galvanising and spiritually nourishing shared time together.

Next up, Jeremy explored a passage from Song of Songs to remind us of a truth we can all sometimes struggle to comprehend. How much God loves us in Christ and just as importantly, how much God desires that we *discover* our belovedness.

Which brought us to another rich time as a gathered community in prayer.

Our celebration of All Saints/All Souls Day. This really was a sacred opportunity to commemorate all of those who have touched our lives, are now passed, but with us into eternity. It was also an opportunity to pray into any hurt we may still carry. And to pray for our hurting world.

And then last week, beautifully integrated with the joyful occasion of 2 baptisms, Chris Clarke took on the important challenge of exploring unanswered prayer. I say important because I've met so many whose faith has been diminished by this reality.

What I most appreciated as I watched on the livestream from Whanganui, is that Chris didn't try to come up with trite answers that help no-one. It was an honest and authentic exploration that ultimately, reminded us of the truth revealed in the Christ who wept. That God is with us, and God is for us in our times of trial.

And not forgetting that in all of this, we also had the gift of hearing the Lord's prayer in the native tongue of some of our own people. And a big thank you for all those who blessed us with their words.

As I said, a rich journey together. Kingdom seeds sown and spiritual fruit grown.

So at the beginning of the week as I started to think about how to bring this whole series together, my prayer was a simple one. **Loving and life-giving God how would you want me to finish this journey? What would most speak into the heart of our prayer lives?**

As so often happens when you ask the Spirit for guidance, that very same day I stumbled upon this quote from German Dominican Friar *Meister Eckhart*.

"If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." Now pause and ponder these words because it's a simple sentence containing a very deep wisdom. And I guess this wisdom struck a chord in me because what I've come to realise more and more, is that whatever expression of prayer you and I may be engaged in...

Be it contemplative prayer - out in nature - walking the dog.

Requests to God to bring healing or protection for someone:

Praying for peace in our own soul or for peace in our world.

Praying for clarity and strength for a life circumstance... whatever our prayer expression may be ...

How important is it that we begin our prayers in the spirit of thanksgiving? That we come to prayer with a grateful thankful heart.

Interesting isn't it, that when the Spirit gives you an insight, you begin to notice just how much scripture emphasises the spirit of thanksgiving. Just read through the letters of St Paul and you'll see this truth at every turn.

For instance, our **verse of the Day**... **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."** 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

This is more than a top tip from Paul on cultivating gratitude for our psychological well-being. This is Paul saying that God is actually 'willing us' to make prayer and thankfulness intrinsic to WHO we are.

Note that Paul doesn't say "give thanks *for* all circumstances. He says, give thanks *IN* all circumstances. It's an important distinction and something I've tried to cultivate more in my own prayer life. Whatever my personal circumstances may be, I try to come with a spirit of grateful thanks for the core gifts.

When we do, I think we get a deeper glimpse into the truth Paul gave to the Philippians ...

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication - with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I think Paul is giving us an important spiritual correlation here. **That the more we cultivate the spirit of thanksgiving in our lives, the more we will cultivate a spirit of peace.**

And could you get a more striking example, than these words to the church of the Colossians and inspiration for you and I today.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts and *be thankful.*

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, singing psalms, and spiritual songs, *with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks to God the Father, through him.* Paul's complete heart for thanksgiving shining through.

And if this doesn't inspire and convict us to infuse all our lives and prayers with the spirit of thanksgiving, look to Jesus Himself.

In today's Gospel, He's feeding the 4,000, and what do we hear Him say?

35 Jesus told the crowd to sit down on the ground. 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, *and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples,*

- Before Jesus does anything, He gives thanks to His Father God.
- When Jesus fed the five thousand, what do we read? He gave thanks.
- When Jesus ate with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, He gave thanks.
- As Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus, about to raise him from the dead, Jesus looked up and said, "Father, **I thank you** that you have heard my prayer."

And then in his last meal, the last supper with His disciples and friends, knowing that the Cross and his death was beckoning, we hear these words in Matthew 26:26-29

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, *gave thanks* and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, (again) *he gave thanks* and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from this, all of you".

And many of you will immediately notice that these are the words at the centre of our Holy Communion Liturgy that we say every week. Isn't this a beautiful reminder to all of us, that in THE central act of our Christian faith we hear Jesus Christ give us the central truth of a spirit of thanksgiving? Which is why our Eucharist is called THE GREAT THANKSGIVING.

I remember when I first became a Priest and had the privilege of taking Communion of being really struck by this. Here is Jesus Christ, the Creator of ALL sustenance, but taking the time to give thanks to God, **for the simple provisions of life?** How profound does this make the simple act of saying grace before we eat our meals each day? Whatever his circumstances Jesus came with a thankful heart.

So how does all of this speak to you and I as a poignant reminder to cultivate infusing our prayers with a grateful heart? To give thanks to God for the simple but precious gifts of life.

We all know the importance of cultivating an attitude of gratitude, but we also know how easy it is to slip into a spirit of taking things for granted. To focus more on the things, we **feel** we don't have, rather than being thankful for the good gifts we do have.

CONCLUSION

So to bring this whole series together, I want to conclude with the Spirit of a thankful heart inspired by today's scripture verses.

Firstly, the sentiment from today's Psalm 107 verse 2 **Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! Tell others. Verse 8. Praise the Lord for his great love and for the wonderful things he has done for you.**

This is a big reminder for me to keep fresh and alive the gratitude for just how much God has completely changed my life around since I came to faith. At a time in my life when I was very lost and hurting, God redeemed, healed, and restored me. And I need to gratefully keep this truth alive in me. And from time to time, remember to tell others.

How do these words speak to you? Take time in your prayers this coming week to remember the wonderful things God has done for you and the simple but precious gifts you've been given.

And one final reason given by the Psalmist of why our lives can be built on thankful hearts.

The first words of Psalm 107... **Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.**

The most important word in that sentiment is the final one. God's goodness and faithfulness endure FOREVER. We are a people and a church who live and move and have our very being centred in the truth of an Eternal hope. But as I always remind myself, eternity is now in session.

Our eternal hope is also very much alive and active in the present moment. Which means that every prayer we make and every action we take, every selfless endeavour we give to the world that's a reflection of Jesus Christ, is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new creation. Because God's goodness and love endures forever.

I want to finish as we started this 9-week journey of prayer. With Bishop Bruce Gilberd.

Yesterday we received an update on Bruce from his son Paul and it's a testimony to Bruce's devotion to continue in a life of prayer to the end, infused with the spirit of thanksgiving.

Here's the heart of Paul's words.

"My father is alive and well in spirit. His faith unwavering and strong. Alas his body is giving way after 85 years of vigorous, and sometimes unpredictable use. He is very clear now about his limited time being devoted to his closest family and friends. He is only awake for 1 or 2 precious hours a day, and is taking morphine, so living mostly without pain.

He continues to this day, the discipline of contemplative morning prayers and reflections with any, and all, who are here at home with him each day.

He has decided not to take treatment, which would only diminish the quality of life he is receiving at home, with views of the precious Paku Bay and the sounds of birds, the wind and the sea.

We thank everyone very much for your love, care and support. Bruce is grateful and aware of the love we all share, and he is at peace with this final part of this life. We are deeply thankful.